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## Charter schools remain subject of debate

August 13, 2004 | By Kathleen Kingsbury CNN

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The cheerleading squad and the math team rarely compete for members at most middle schools, but at Fulton Science Academy, they are often second choices to the Chess Club.

The charter school in Alpharetta, Georgia, has a highly tailored math and science curriculum that stresses problem solving. Students work in small groups to tackle math problems and learn science and robotics through a hands-on approach aimed at complementing its attendees' aptitudes.

"Math and science were always my favorites," says eighth-grader Blake Lanham, 13. "Now everybody is really into them."

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Kim Parker says she sent her son Jeremy to Fulton Science Academy when it opened in September 2002 because of that emphasis.

"You have to look at what is best for your kids," says Parker, whose son is now an eighth-grader at Fulton Science Academy. "Charter schools give you a choice over being stuck sending them to the public school down the street."

Charter schools are publicly financed schools that operate largely independent of government regulation, which makes them the subject of debate among some in the public school and education communities.

Proponents laud such programs as innovative, efficient alternatives to low-performing traditional public schools. President Bush has proposed \$318 million in federal funds for charter schools in his 2005 budget.

"You see, charter schools say to the world, 'If you got a better idea, show up and show us whether or not you can do a better job of challenging the status quo if the status quo is failing,'" Bush said in a speech last summer.

Some in the education field, however, argue that charter schools take precious public dollars away from traditional schools.

"It's grossly unfair," says Catherine Boudreau, president of the Massachusetts Teachers Association. "Charter schools affect a small percentage of the community at a large cost to the majority."

About 2,700 charter schools nationwide have opened since 1991 and serve nearly 700,000 students in 36 states and the District of Columbia, according to the federal Department of Education. States write their own charter laws, which vary in the amount of oversight and money the nontraditional schools receive.

Once a charter is approved, states generally hold the school accountable for performance through standardized test scores. A school can be closed if it doesn't meet standards outlined in its charter.

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